

Stringfellow Response to South Kingstown School Committee Report

I resigned as South Kingstown Superintendent on April 24, 2019 (effective June 30) after being appointed as the Norwich, CT Superintendent. I had made a choice to remain silent about my concerns for the South Kingstown School Department. However, on August 14, 2019, I was contacted by Norwich Newspapers asking me to comment on a “report” of an “investigation” that South Kingstown School Committee SKSC Chair Stephanie Canter shared with them concerning my annual Open Meetings Act notification of South Kingstown teachers, which this year occurred on April 19. To say the least, I was stunned. I was no longer a South Kingstown employee, and I am extremely happy in my position in Norwich. I had moved on. I devoted a decade of my life to the students of South Kingstown and significant positive change occurred during that time. I am convinced that this “investigation” of the normal teacher notification process was undertaken in retaliation for my accepting the position in Norwich.

I categorically reject the SK Report as being politically motivated. I complied with all laws, applicable policies and the CBA (collective bargaining agreement) when I sent Open Meeting Act (OMA) Notices to certain teachers on April 19 consistent with past practice. These notices informed the teacher that the School Committee would be discussing his or her employment in executive session, but that the discussion would take place in open session if the teacher so requested. Such School Committee discussions could not take place unless the OMA Notice had been given. These were not termination notices since only the School Committee has the authority to terminate teachers under Rhode Island law. These OMA Notices simply provided the School Committee with the options it needed to make personnel decisions at its May 14 meeting, nothing more.

Unfortunately, I have been swept up in the political turmoil that has enveloped the South Kingstown School Committee and which has caused approximately 12 talented school administrators to leave the School Department in recent months. I submit this response to set the record straight.

My response is organized as follows:

- **Who Am I?** Strangers from RI, CT and beyond were given an audience into my professional life, I thought it fitting and proper to introduce myself.
- **Early Years in South Kingstown** This portion describes the SKSD in 2009 when I arrived.
- **State of the district as of November 6, 2018**
- **Highlights and my reaction to the “investigation” report** I plan to make public text messages and emails from the SC as evidence to support my statements.
- **Timeline** Timing is important as it demonstrates a clear picture of facts.
- **History of Lay off numbers** In response to the claim is that I “over laid off,” please see the data for yourself. Given the drastic budget reduction, this year the notification list was modest compared to some previous years.
- **Key Policies and Laws** This information was shared with CR (Charles Ruggiero) but missing from the analysis.
- **The PAT (Personnel Assignment Team) Policy on SK Board Docs is Incorrect**

I reference official approved minutes of the SKSC meeting as published on Board Docs and the Secretary of State website. If the incorrect policy was used for teacher job action this year, it could be an issue for SK teachers.

- **ESL Corrective Action Plan with the RIDE** (RI Department of Education) This is the document I relied on to make ESL (English as a Second Language) staffing decisions. It is the plan that Assistant Superintendent Pauline Lisi referenced and it appears that some of the ESL staffing decisions made on May 28 may not in alignment with this plan. I described it for CR but it was not referenced in his analysis.
- **Budget** is important as it constantly changed from January to June. It was a different context for me on April 19th than it was for Interim Superintendent Hicks on May 28th
- **Responses to erroneous assertions made in the report**
 - Why send letters on April 19?
 - Why notice these teachers?
 - Were these letters OMA notification or layoff letters?
 - Over identify?
 - April 9th's effect on this process
 - Why was this an "investigation" instead of a grievance?
 - Did SK teachers worry that they were being noticed for cause?
 - Consultation with NEA-SK (the union)
 - Consultation with Andrew Henneous, the SC Attorney
 - Consultation with the School Committee
 - Consultation with individual teachers
 - Why were the actual teachers noticed different from April 19 to May 28?
 - Why involuntarily transfer?
 - Why displace?
 - Not following a SC directive?
 - Noticing was improper?
 - Unsubstantiated accusation of negligence?
 - Not in compliance with law?
 - There is no evidence to substantiate this claim.
 - Spending taxpayer money unnecessarily
- **Text messages from SC members Stephanie Canter and Emily Cummiskey**
- **Email from NEA-SK Teachers' Union President Brian Nelson to staff on April 22, 2019**
- **Email from SC Chair Stephanie Canter to staff and families on April 22, 2019**

Who Am I?

I am the only child of a single parent and the first college graduate in my family. I met my husband of 31 years when I was 18 years old and married him after college. We have four children (three are RI public school educators and one is in college). My children work in the East Providence, Pawtucket and Providence Public Schools. I started teaching in 1988. A majority of my teaching career took place in the East Providence Public Schools. After teaching I served as an elementary principal, alternative high school principal, ESL Director, Reading & Title I Director, Director of Gifted and Talented and Assistant Superintendent in East Providence and Scituate (for over 11 years). I taught college level mathematics at New England Tech, ESL & Communications in the M.B.A. program at Johnson & Wales University. Since 2007, I have

taught School Finance at Providence College for RI teachers who want to be certified as a principal or superintendent. I was the RI Superintendent of the Year in 2017 and President of the RI Superintendent's Association from 2017-2019.

Beyond my baccalaureate work, I earned two master's degrees (one in early childhood and elementary education from RI College and one in Administration from Providence College). I have two CAGS degrees (Certificates of Advanced Graduate Study work beyond a master's degree) in Educational Leadership, Educational Research and Curriculum. I earned my doctorate in Educational Leadership with a focus in School Finance.

Early Years in South Kingstown

I was hired as the Superintendent in South Kingstown on February 26, 2009 and began work on June 1, 2009.

Here are some facts about the school department when I came on board in 2009:

- High school graduation rate range from 80-85%
- No opportunity for high school credit recovery, high school summer school or after school help for students
- More than 12 special education directors in 10 years
- Revolving door of building principals
- No comprehensive reading district program and no comprehensive district math program
- No response to intervention RtI program (mandated by federal law)
- Significant special education lawsuits
- No middle school or elementary world language courses except for a course in world culture
- Largely self-contained special education classes (out of compliance with federal special education law)
- Segregation of all ESL (English as a Second language) elementary students at WKES (out of compliance with federal law)
- 6-8% property tax transfer to the schools from the town of South Kingstown
- Dozens of union grievances left unresolved
- No teacher leadership positions except for traditional roles such as department chair and team leaders
- Limited use of GEMS Net science kits
- No formal structure for instructional improvement and success
- No communication plan with the community
- No plan for stakeholder community engagement in teaching and learning
- No career and technical education CTE Programs
- Five levels of every HS core course (AP/EE (Advanced Placement/Early Enrollment), Honors, College Prep, A level (below regular), and B level (significantly below level). Over identification and segregation of students of color and special education students in the lower level A & B classes.
- Closed honors courses (pre-requisites difficult for historically under-represented students to access)
- No high leverage student impact policies (Equity, transgender, etc.)

- Both middle schools (MS) were just reconfigured one month before my arrival. Electives (home economics, woodworking, etc.) were eliminated. All grade seven & eight students were placed at CCMS and all grade 6 students were placed at BRMS. Grade 6 students only were scheduled for a ½ year of Science and ½ year of SS. Parents were outraged. Teachers had been assigned to positions that were not aligned to their certification. Union leadership and I spent our summer working with RIDE to transfer most MS teachers into positions they were actually certified to hold.
- No district safety committee in compliance with RIDE regulations.
- Only 83 students took AP Advanced Placement courses.
- High numbers of out of district special education placements (many parents wanting their students to attend their neighborhood school).
- High chronic student absenteeism.

State of the District as of November 6, 2018

- High school graduation rate range from 90-95%
- Teachers College Reading/Writing Project affiliate district K-8 since 2011
- Aligned K-12 mathematics, science and SS programs
- HS alternative program with credit recovery and enrichment programs and courses, summer school, Saturday school, vacation ramp up programs, APC (after school academic proficiency center for re-teach and re-assess)
- High leverage policies (Student Achievement & Success, Student Equity, Transgender, etc.)
- K-12 world language instruction
- K-3 DLI (dual language immersion) programs in Spanish for 44% of students (offered to all).
- Grow your own ESL and DLI teacher certification program at 85% cost share to the district
- RtI and data days with fidelity
- Teacher leadership positions (Deans of students, technology coaches, literacy coaches, math coaches/interventionists, social emotional learning coach, CTE and internship coach)
- Approved CTE programs in Allied Health (CNA, EMT), Fine Arts, Carpentry, Computer Science & Finance
- Solid administrative structure (STEM coordinator, RtI coordinator, Literacy coordinator, ESL/DLI Coordinator, data manager)
- Communications plan with social media presence, key stakeholder meetings, community conversations, etc.
- 5-year strategic plan vision for success (with yearly report out on objectives)
- Three levels of HS core courses (regular is the lowest level): AP/EE, Honors, regular college prep (this increased rigor and access for ALL students)-students no longer segregated
- Open honors program (pre-requisites still intact but opportunity for parents to opt in thereby affording historically under-represented students access to these courses)
- Created a de-segregation plan with the RIDE for elementary ESL students
- Securing badges (swipe in & out) for school security. A full comprehensive safety and security plan. District safety committee in full compliance with state regulations.

- 454 students took AP courses
- Significant increase in student attendance
- Special education students placed in least restrictive environments in their neighborhood schools.

This positive work was accomplished alongside very talented administrators (approximately 12 of whom have resigned or retired since March/April of 2019-including me), student focused school committee members, talented teachers and dedicated support staff.

Here are the highlights of my reactions to this report of their “investigation”

Timeline

The timeline is important. It clearly shows the facts and pattern of events.

Date	
April 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SC meeting, PAT policy changed abruptly by suspending SC bylaws requirement for 2 public readings before passing policy • I saw the PAT policy for the very 1st time • I was in the midst of creating the lists of teachers to be noticed
April 15-19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • April vacation-teachers and students on break
Fri, April 19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OMA (Open Meeting Act) notices sent out (in alignment with the PAT Committee agreed upon timeline) • Please note that Co-Chair (NEA-SK Teachers’ Union President) did not attend any PAT meetings this year (including the meeting where the annual timeline was set). • NEA-SK President and principals were cc’d on every OMA Notice.
Sat, April 20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emailed a heads up to the SC to let them know that the OMA letters were sent & reminding them that they are not notices of layoff. • I sent the email as a courtesy because three of the SC members have not participated before and two SC members only participated once after being appointed mid-year.
Mon, April 22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Text from Stephanie Canter (SC Chair) 9:07PM <i>“Major issues with the way layoffs were carried out. This was disrespectful and in complete disregard of standard operating procedures, and you know it.”</i> • Text from Emily Cummiskey (SC member) 5:58PM <i>“Hi, Did lay-off notices go out without consulting the union? Is that typical? The union seems to be expecting a meeting to discuss who was being laid off prior to the notices going out.”</i>
Tues, April 23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I was on a vacation day so at 7AM I asked Mary Ellen Murano to email the SC a response to the inquiries received the night before: <i>“Dear SC, Kristen is on a vacation day today and cannot be reached until tomorrow. A quorum of the SC has reached out to her regarding the email she sent to the SC on Saturday. She can’t respond to the inquiries or she will cause an open meeting violation. Here is the information that she would like to share with you:</i> 1. <i>As indicated in her email on Saturday, the letters sent were not non-renewals or layoff notices. They are notices regarding rights under the Open Meeting Law for personnel discussion in executive session.</i>

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. <i>These are the same notices that are sent out each year by certified mail, in the same manner that they have been sent for the past 9 years.</i> 3. <i>The Superintendent only recommends layoffs in executive session. It is the SC who makes the actual decision during a SC meeting to lay off or non renew faculty each year prior to the deadline set by state law.</i> 4. <i>The PAT (Personnel Assignment Team), the membership of which is composed of equal numbers of teachers and administrators, confirmed the PAT notification calendar at their last meeting. Brian Nelson is the co-chair of the PAT Team.</i> 5. <i>In SK, principals do not meet with teachers to give them their OMA notices. Several years ago, teacher union leadership requested that teachers receive their notifications via certified mail out of respect for the teachers. We have followed that same procedure each year, including this year.</i> 6. <i>OMA notices are sent as early as possible prior to the SC meeting so that teachers have ample time to consult with union leadership and determine whether or not they want discussion held in open session. The actual "lay off" list can and will change, as it does every year due to teachers submitted notices of retirement, LOA, etc. The list typically gets shorter, thankfully.</i> 7. <i>The new MOA and policy that the SC approved on 4/9/19 requires that the posting of vacancies be done annually June 1st or upon approval of the SKSD budget by the SC, whichever comes first. The budget was approved on 4/9/19. This process was a big change not expected by the Superintendent, compressing the process timeline. In order to properly comply with the MOA and policy this year she worked day and night over April vacation to complete the notice list, displacement list, transfer list, and vacancy list. Brian Nelson and principals were copied on every letter.</i> 8. <i>The Superintendent finalized the vacancy list yesterday and planned to distribute to teachers today. However, the list will only be sent to Brian Nelson and Principals (as a draft) due to the SC feedback regarding the notice letters. Teachers will receive this list later this week.</i> 9. <i>The process this year was incredibly complex due to budget cuts of more than 20 FTEs plus the brand new MOA and policy approved in the midst of the process. This year, the Superintendent has about 1 week to complete a process that usually takes 2-3 months. She did the best she could under the circumstances.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>During the Day NEA-SK President BN sent an email to the staff (it follows)</i> • <i>During the Day SC Chair Canter sent an email to staff and parents (it follows)</i> • <i>9:19AM Andrew Henneous scheduled a meeting with me on Thursday April 25 to discuss the notices. The email was sent to me and Mary Ellen and SC and it reads, "Hi Mary Ellen, I understand Kristen is out for a day or two so I am sending this directly to you. The chair contacted me concerned about recent notices that went out to certified staff regarding displacements, etc. Apparently the notices came as a surprise to both the Committee and the Union. She would like to set up a meeting with Kristen, herself and either Aubrey or I to review the notices and to get an understanding as to why they went out and what the thought process behind them was. Can you try to get a few possible dates and times over the next week?"</i> • <i>5:30PM Appointment as Norwich Superintendent</i> • <i>7:05PM Stephanie Canter texts me a picture of the Norwich Public Schools Facebook Page Congratulating me on my appointment as Superintendent and writes "Well this</i>
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	<p><i>explains a lot (sad face) Congratulations on the opportunity, Kristen. You've done brilliant things in SK."</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7:22PM Emily Cummiskey texts me a picture of Norwich Public Schools Facebook Page Congratulating me on my appointment as Superintendent and writes "<i>Congratulations</i>"
Wed, April 24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7AM I submit my letter of resignation effective June 30, 2019. • Emily Cummiskey calls central office staff asking for recommendations for an immediate Interim Superintendent. Central office staff tell Ms. Cummiskey that I plan to remain until June 30th to transition the new superintendent. • Afternoon- Andrew Henneous & Stephanie Canter cancel the meeting with me scheduled for tomorrow to discuss notices. They state the meeting is "<i>no longer necessary.</i>" • Afternoon- OMA Notice from Andrew Henneous stating that the SC will be discussing my job performance (<i>specifically as it related to a recent situation involving employee notices</i>) I believe there was a problem with this notice Henneous because I received an updated notice the next day. I believe the law cited for the meeting was incorrect.
Thurs, April 25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I was supposed to meet with Andrew Henneous and Chair Canter to discuss notices (they cancelled the meeting after learning that I had been appointed in Norwich and resigned effective June 30). • 8:58AM email from Andrew Henneous 2nd notice of tomorrow's executive session with a different law referenced.
Fri, April 26	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SC voted 5-2 to place me on paid administrative leave pending the outcome of an investigation into the "<i>circumstances surrounding the recent "displacement notices,"</i>" that went out to staff." • Stephanie Canter sent an email to all SK faculty, staff and families-"<i>Recently, Dr. Stringfellow accepted a position in Connecticut and currently, Assistant Superintendent Pauline Lisi is our point person in central administration. Likely, within 10 days, we will appoint an interim superintendent. At that time, we will also determine our plan for recruitment and selection of a new superintendent. We have received some excellent guidance on how to approach the selection process using extensive community input. I have already talked at length not only with legal counsel but also some K-12 experts within the state and I am really hopeful and confident. This is not to say that this will be simple, but I fully believe that positive and visionary times are ahead. As an entire district team, we look forward to starting the process for hiring a new superintendent as expeditiously as possible and are excited about moving the district forward.</i>"
May 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SKSC appointed CR Charles Ruggiero, Deputy City Solicitor in Providence, to investigate. • SKSC appointed Robert Hicks Interim Superintendent
May 14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Original SC meeting to discuss personnel recommendations
June 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stephanie Canter, SC Chair South Kingstown School Committee Public Facebook Post -"<i>To our community members that are seeking an update on the investigation that prompted Dr. Stringfellow's administrative leave: I have not personally seen the final report from Charles Ruggiero. I believe it's forthcoming, but probably not</i>

	<i>prior to next Tuesday. After consulting with our attorney, the most we can say at this point is that the investigation is ongoing, and we have asked that it be concluded as quickly as possible so that the district can move forward and focus on educating our students. While it has taken a month, please consider that this is in no way someone's full time job focus, and there were multiple individuals that needed to submit statements. I anticipate that much of the report won't be discussed publicly, and the lack of available details may feel frustrating. That is the nature of legal counsel in essentially all personnel matters."</i>
June 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Charles Ruggiero very first contact with me. • He would like to interview me next week so that he can wrap up his "investigation." He is planning on June 13. I confirm and we make a plan to meet at 3pm. • He requests to interview me by telephone instead of interviewing me in person. • He states, "he wants to focus on the reasoning and motivation behind the proposed personnel actions I submitted to the SC in late April" (please see email from Andrew Henneous of April 2, above, which asked for a meeting previously on the exact same topic)-that meeting with Henneous was cancelled by Henneous if you recall.
June 13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brief telephone interview with Charles Ruggiero.
June 30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Last contracted day with SK
July 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First official day in Norwich
August 13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SC votes to make report and some exhibits public without discussing it. • Stephanie Canter reaches out the Norwich reporters to share the report.
August 14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Norwich newspaper reporters call me to get my reaction to a report never shared with me.

History of Layoff Numbers

- The report insinuates that I over-noticed teachers and that created disruption.
- Here is the history of budget reduction plan and OMA notices and eventual layoffs.

Year	Budget Reduction Amount	OMA Notices of Exec Session Sent by Superintendent	Actual Layoffs Issued by SC
2010	Not avail on Board Docs (BD)	More than 98	98
2011	Not avail on BD	More than 144	144
2012	Not avail on BD	More than 51	51
2013	\$1,941,500	More than 80	80
2014	\$761,000	More than 50	50
2015	\$1,500,000	More than 20	20
2016	\$972,670	More than 11	11
2017	\$1,100,000	More than 17	17
2018	\$1,205,000	More than 30	30
2019	\$3,840,910*	69	Less than 69

*Please note the budget reduction plan this year was significantly larger than previous years.

Most personnel reductions voted on by the SC were teachers. Knowing that, I was required to bring choices to the SC per Stephanie Canter's April 15 text (noted below), and knowing there was a strong potential for a budget referendum.

Key Laws and SK Policies are important-Shared with Charles Ruggiero during interview but omitted from analysis:

- RIGL Title 16-2-11 General duties and powers of the superintendent 8. *“To administer the personnel function of the school department consistent with personnel standards, policies, and the table of organization established by the SC.”*
- SKSC Policy 5105 General Personnel Rule *“To keep its personnel policies and the corresponding administrative regulations, in the highest state of effectiveness to achieve the above purposes, the Superintendent is directed to establish the procedures needed”*
- SKSC Policy 5305 Superintendent 22. *“Be responsible for the recruitment, selection, assignment, transfer and dismissal of all employees within the school district”*
- RI Code of Professional Responsibility & SKSC Policy 5150 3-3 *“Encourage and support staffing decisions that are made in the best interest of students”*

The PAT Policy that is posted on SK Board Docs is Incorrect

On April 9, the SC did not vote to eliminate the current PAT policy 5425 and replace it with new North Kingstown language. They voted to replace sections on “New Positions” and “Voluntary Positions” only and replace with new language.

That leaves the following sections intact:

- *“Transfers, assignments, layoffs and recalls all shall be based on the Superintendent’s assessment of what teacher will be the most effective staff member to meet the particular student needs at issue.*
- *“Involuntary transfer-The Superintendent shall have the right to involuntarily transfer any employee in the best interest of the students and/or school. No teacher shall be transferred involuntarily without good cause.”*
- *“Layoffs-In the event of layoff, employees shall be laid off based on the Superintendent’s assessment of which members of the staff will be most effective in meeting student need if retained. The superintendent retains the right to consult with the district administrative team to determine which staff members will be most effective in meeting student need. Notice shall be provided to employees.”*
- *“Suspensions of staff due to a decrease in school population will be made in accordance with RIGL 16-13-6. Reductions in force for other reasons will take certification and qualifications, job performance, and evidence of effectiveness, in addition to experience, into account”*
- *“Academic coaches on leave from their positions for up to 3 years will be afforded the opportunity to return to their former position, if available or apply for a new assignment or remain in the academic coaching position.”*

Official approved April 9th SC minutes (posted on Board Docs and the RI Secretary of State website) pertaining to community comments:

- *“Robert Mezzanotte, Principal, expressed concern about the passing of the proposed amendment to the PAT policy and its effect on students at the high school.*
- *Shivali Finkelstein, Assistant Principal, spoke about the CTE programs and the various different requirements.*
- *Brian Nelson, NEASK President, spoke about the PAT policy and the need for a transparent policy.*
- *Mick Lefort, NEASK Vice President, spoke about the PAT process and advised that the PAT process is about transfers, not layoffs.”*

Official approved April 9th SC minutes (posted on Board Docs and the RI Secretary of State website) pertaining to approval of policy:

- *“Proposed Amendment to PAT Policy vote to approve and vote to suspend the bylaws in lieu of a 1st Reading*
 - *Sarah Markey recused herself from the discussion.*
 - *Ms. Canter requested to suspend the bylaws 9.3 in lieu of a first reading for the proposed amendment to PAT policy.*
 - *Committee members discussed any issues with the existing policy. Lengthy discussion followed regarding the importance of specialty position requirements be written into a vacancy posting; concern about consequences with moving so quickly with this change; and putting this in the Collective Bargaining Agreement.*
 - *MSV (11) move to suspend typical policy process due to a new MOA being in the best interest of the district, which is in bylaws 9.3. Motion made by: Jacy Northup Motion seconded by: Alycia Collins Vote: Stephanie Canter – Yes Sarah Markey – Recused Emily Cummiskey – Yes Kate Macinanti – No Jacy Northup – Yes Michelle Brousseau – No Alycia Collins - Yes*
- *MSV (12) move to suspend policy #5425 as it applies to “A” new positions and “B” voluntary transfers. Motion made by: Kate Macinanti Motion seconded by: Jacy Northup Vote: Stephanie Canter – Yes Sarah Markey – Recused Emily Cummiskey – Yes Kate Macinanti – Yes Jacy Northup – Yes Michelle Brousseau – No Alycia Collins - Yes*
- *MOA NEA-SK Personnel Assignment Vote MSV (13) move to approve the MOA regarding Article V and vacancy transfers. Motion made by: Kate Macinanti Motion seconded by: Jacy Northup Vote: Stephanie Canter – Yes Sarah Markey – Recused Emily Cummiskey – Yes Kate Macinanti – No Jacy Northup – Yes Michelle Brousseau – No Alycia Collins – Yes”*

ESL Corrective Action Plan with the RIDE (RI Department of Education)-This is the document relied upon to make ESL (English as a Second Language) staffing decisions. It is the plan that Pauline Lisi referenced and it appears that some of the ESL staffing decisions made on May 28 are not in alignment with this plan. I described it for Charles Ruggiero but it was not referenced in his analysis.

- August 2010, parental complaint lodged at the RIDE against SKSD by a parent with elementary ESL students.
- Prior to my arrival, all elementary ESL students were segregated to West Kingston Elementary School and they were not permitted to attend their neighborhood elementary school.
- The concerned parent wanted her children to attend their neighborhood elementary school and receive ESL services (required by federal law).
- RIDE conducted a 2 day site visit of the SK ESL program and found the program in violation of federal law because students were segregated and forced to attend West Kingston Elementary to gain access to federally required services and because the former pull out model of instruction was out of compliance with RI State law required minutes of instruction for ESL students.
- SK was required to create a corrective action plan that transferred the complainant’s children back to their home school with ESL instruction. Our long-term action plan

required us to provide adequate staffing at each school and in each grade level in the near future.

- In 2011, we notified teachers and NEA-SK union leadership that lower seniority teachers should seek to become ESL certified in order to have the best chance to remain employed in the future.
- In 2014 we provided the equivalent of a master 's degree and certification in ESL to all Early Childhood, Elementary certified teachers at 85% cost to the district, and 15% cost to the teacher. Cohort 1 in 2014 had space for 20 teachers. Twelve teachers applied and were accepted. Several dropped out but several became certified in May 2017. Cohort 2 was launched in 2015 and had space for 20 teachers. Fifteen teachers applied and were accepted. Five dropped out. The others were eligible for certification in May 2018.
- 2010 RIDE ESL regulations state, "ELL (English Language Learner) programs must be distributed in the school district's facilities in such a way that English Language Learners are not inappropriately clustered away from students in the schools' regular education programs or assigned only to a restricted range of schools, when other school housing options are available to provide quality services based on students' educational needs and scientifically researched based instructional models."
- RI Law 16-14 L-4-7 requires specific minutes of instruction for ELL students. It states, "Entering and beginning level English language learner students must receive a minimum of 3 periods (or the equivalent of 3 hours) of ELL instruction per day. Developing ELLS must receive a minimum of 2 periods (or the equivalent of 2 hours) of ELL instruction per day. Expanding and bridging ELLs must receive a minimum of 1 period (or the equivalent) per day. The ELL instruction must be taught by an ELL certified teacher.
- The long term corrective action plan with RIDE included the following:
 - Action Plan Year 2016-2017-West Kingston Elementary School will have an ELL certified teacher at each grade level and ELL students will be placed in those classes.
 - Action Plan Year 2017-2018-Expand ELL program support to all elementary schools by 2020 (each grade at each elementary school).
 - Action Plan Year 2018-2019-Expand to Middle Schools
 - Action Plan Year 2019-2020-Expand to High School

Budget is important as it constantly changed from January to June. It was a different context for me on April 19 than it was for Interim Superintendent Hicks on May 28. This information is missing from the Ruggiero report. The budget components noted in the report are less than the actual reductions shared and discussed at the following SC meetings.

- As of December 2018 joint TC/SC meeting the following served as the proforma:
 - With 4% PTT (Property Tax Transfer from the Town) the schools would need to cut \$2,241,341
 - With 3% PTT it is a cut of \$2,780,841
 - With 2% PTT it is a cut of \$3,320,368
 - With 1% PTT it is a cut of \$3,859,894
 - With 0% PTT it is a cut of \$4,399,421
- The Town Council asked the SK School Committee to prepare a budget at 1% that necessitated a cut of \$3,859,894.

- At the February 4, 2019 SC meeting the SC had not complied with the Town Council request of 1%. The SC made cuts that would require a 3.1555% PTT.
- As of March 12th the SC cut 19.7 NEA-SK FTEs, 9.5 ESP FTEs and 3.5 Admin FTEs.
- As of April 9, the budget was set at \$61,797,342 which necessitated an additional \$405,517 in cuts.
- As of May 28 public memo to the SC from Interim Superintendent Hicks he states that he “made changes to the originally planned elementary classroom organization. He cut 40.9 FTEs .”
- The report it states that “*Ultimately, a total of 23 teachers were laid off and another 16 teachers had their positions reduced in some manner.*” This amount appears inconsistent with Interim Superintendent Hicks’ memo shared at the SC meeting.

Responses to erroneous assertions made in the report

- **Why send letters on April 19?**
 - The report states, “*It was not necessary to notify teachers until such time as it was conclusively determined by the Committee which teachers specifically were being laid off and consolidated.*”
 - This is not legally accurate. The SC cannot have a legal discussion on this matter outside of a meeting. In order for them to speak about this matter at a meeting, each teacher must be properly noticed as required by the Open Meetings Act (OMA).
- **Why notice these teachers?**
 - By the RI OMA, the SC would be unable to discuss the layoffs in executive session on May 14 if I had not properly noticed the teachers being discussed.
- **Were these letters OMA notification or layoff letters?**
 - The letters were not layoff letters.
 - The letters were OMA notification.
 - We issued the same format letters that we have issued in the past.
 - I had no indication or directive that legal wished to change the letters and there was no grievance or concern on the letters from NEA-SK the previous year (when NEA-SK President Nelson was VP of NEA-SK).
 - The intent of the OMA noticing is to notify teachers they would be discussed in executive session by the Committee. It is not the notice of termination voted on by the Committee as that is a separate letter sent by the SC Chair.
- **Over-identify?**
 - As I indicated in my interview, I was required to slightly over-identify for four reasons.
 - (1) As of April 19, the Town Council budget was not yet finalized.
 - (2) Stephanie Canter text to me (see page 18/19 for context) “*I think that the committee will ultimately vote to prevent further cuts to music personnel, and treat the retirement as an FTE reduction. So I would mentally prepare for that when you look at cuts.*”
 - (3) There was still a potential of referendum at that time.
 - (4) The actual teachers laid off was not my decision to make. It was my responsibility to provide the SC with options for their consideration.

- Knowing all of those reasons, I still limited the number of notices due to my deep concern for the teachers in question.
- I needed to balance the financial health of the Department with the need to provide options to the SC.
- The report states, *“This is demonstrated quite unequivocally by the ‘options’ Stringfellow sought to provide to the Committee and the over-notification of employees, which resulted in teachers receiving notices.”*
- This report fails to account for the significant differences in the information available on May 28 as opposed to April 19 (timing, budget requirements, referendum, notice of retirements, notice of resignations, notice of requests for LOA, etc.).
- I sent OMA notices to 49.2 FTEs (69 people) on April 19th
- The SC eventually reduced to 40.9FTEs (see Interim Superintendent Hicks memo to SC posted on Board Docs May 28th). Board Docs does not list the number of people.
- The difference between my noticing on April 19 and the actual layoffs on May 28 were a difference of 8.3 FTEs.
- On May 28 more retirements, LOA and resignations were known, therefore no need to reduce as many FTEs.
- As of May 28, there was also no longer a threat of referendum.
- As of May 28, due to the circumstances resolved via referendum, TC vote of budget, retirements, resignations, leaves of absence and SC actual vote on layoffs, the number of teachers officially laid off would be the same (whether sent by me or Interim Superintendent Hicks)
- **April 9th's effect on this process**
 - The new PAT policy of April 9 included an additional feature that affected the timeline and process this year significantly. It was now required that I immediately create a vacancy list. Typically, this was not done until June. The policy change required it at the time the budget passed (which was also on April 9). I was required to full comply with this new policy.
 - In order to create a vacancy list I had to first resolve involuntary transfers, displacements and lay off recommendations. The vacancy list represents those positions available to bargaining unit members after the aforementioned components are resolved.
 - I spent April vacation creating the OMA notice list, the displacement list, the involuntary transfer list and the draft vacancy list for NEA-SK. Under normal circumstances, I would have 2 months to do this work because vacancy lists were previously due in June.
 - I emailed a draft copy of the vacancy list to the NEA-SK president on April 22.
 - If/when the SC changed the lists on May 14 this vacancy list could be amended (as it was by the SC and Interim Superintendent Hicks). I shared this all with Charles Ruggiero during our telephone interview but it was not mentioned in his report.
 - At the April 9 SC meeting I had shared my concerns with the SC that if they were to change the PAT policy in such a rushed manner, I was extremely worried that mistakes would be made in the lists.

- Although it was extremely rushed process, the Assistant Superintendent and CFO announced publicly to the SC on May 3 that it appeared that I did the lists correctly.
- **Why was this an “investigation” instead of a NEA-SK grievance?**
 - The report indicated that the reason the SC launched this investigation is that they received complaints from community members.
 - How would community members know about confidential personnel notices?
 - They claim in the report that principals and administrators raised concerns about the process. How is that logical when the principals and administrators gave me the specific cuts?
 - It is well known that community members, principals, teachers and I were very concerned about the cuts and the potential to lose extremely talented teachers. That is a different concern from a complaint of process. Were the principals and administrators expressing concerns over process or over the talented individuals that may be without work? I believe it is the latter.
 - Why was an investigation launched? NEA-SK has at their disposal the option of grievance. They did not file a grievance while I was serving as Superintendent. After my leave, they must have submitted a grievance.
 - Why wasn’t this easily resolved through a grievance at the Superintendent or SC level? That would have cost nothing (or very little in legal fees to Henneous) and I could have transitioned the new superintendent smoothly into their role.
- **Did SK teachers worry that they were being noticed “for cause?”**
 - The report states, *“Further, the Committee was not discussing the job performance of each of the teachers, as identified on the April 19, 2019 notice. According to all accounts, none of these teachers was being considered for termination as a result job performance. The April 19, 2019 letters were thus inaccurate and led all the teachers who received them to wrongly believe their job performance was at issue.”*
 - I utilized the same letter verbiage as was sent in previous years at this time of year. The legal language contained in that letter was the result of a grievance that the current SC legal counsel, union president and chair were not a part of, as it occurred prior to them coming on board.
 - If Andrew Henneous wanted me to use a different letter, I would have been more than happy to do so.
 - How did Charles Ruggiero determine that *“all the teachers who received (the notices)”* were led to *“wrongly believe their job performance was at issue.”* Did he ask them?
 - There were meetings held with the union president and vice president and non-tenured teachers (as was done annually) where the mentor teachers and the union leadership advised teachers that these notices are not due to performance or as you know, the teachers would have had to have been noticed prior to March 1. I have emails from NEA-SK leadership and teacher mentor leaders regarding this meeting.
- **Consultation with NEA-SK**

- I was not permitted to honor that meeting with NEA-SK President Nelson and Mary Barden, which was scheduled before the layoff decisions would be made at the May 14 meeting as I was placed on LOA on April 26.
- The consultation meeting with NEA-SK was already scheduled before May 14 and before I was placed on leave.
- Before the initial PAT policy was initially created, I did not meet with union leadership on matters of notification.
- As I explained in my telephone conference with Charles Ruggiero, after the PAT policy was created, I met with union president at my request because he was the PAT Committee co-chair. I met so that I could share the list and we would try to avoid some of the layoff recommendations by working through the process of reinstatement. We could do this because seniority was not the only factor in determining personnel assignment, experience and effectiveness as well as training and education were considered. If someone was clearly more qualified than someone with similar or a bit higher seniority, I could avoid recommending lay off. There was no longer a need to do this when the original PAT policy and PAT Committee was dissolved on April 9.
- Time was a barrier. In order to provide NEA-SK the vacancy list immediately after the budget was passed, which was now required by contract and policy via actions of April 9, teachers needed to be noticed for OMA, displacement and transfer.
- The report states, *“Nor did she meet and acquire the Union’s approval regarding the final list of affected teachers.”* When was I directed to acquire the union’s approval? That is new information to me. I was never asked to acquire the union’s approval on recommendations for layoff. I was required, of course, to acquire the SC approval (which would have happened on May 14).
- **Consultation with Andrew Henneous legal**
 - The report states, *“the record is clear that Stringfellow did not advise members of the Committee or SKSD’s attorney Andrew Henneous in advance of sending the April 19, 2019 notices.”*
 - Consultation with the SKSD attorney was not a practice in the past. It was not a requirement in the CBA (collective bargaining agreement) or any policy or law.
 - I do not recall every being directed or asked to meet with him on this matter. How would I know that he wanted to meet? He never shared that sentiment with me. I would have been happy to meet with him had he asked.
 - In fact, Andrew Henneous scheduled a meeting with me on April 15 but then cancelled it when I announced I was leaving for Norwich in July saying, *“It was no longer necessary to meet.”* Then, the topic moved from a meeting to an “investigation.”
- **Consultation with the SC**
 - The report stated,
 - *“Stringfellow and SKSD administration certainly could have presented the Committee with options for this second phase of cuts/consolidations before sending official notice to the affected teachers.”*
 - *“According to Canter, the notices were sent without any coordination with or forewarning to the Committee.”*

- *“Once identified however, Canter reported that Stringfellow was directed to bring these recommendations back to the Committee for approval and review the list of impacted teachers with the Union before officially notifying the impacted teachers.”*
 - *“It is uncontroverted that this did not occur prior to the April 19, 2019 notices, causing confusion and chaos for everyone involved. It is clear that as of April 19, 2019, SKSD still did not know every specific position that was being reduced or eliminated.”*
 - *“It is logical that before causing unnecessary upheaval amongst its staff, the Committee, SKSD administration and the Union would have a final understanding of specifically which positions and which staff members were being laid off.”*
 - *“Chair Canter reported that it was the expectation of the Committee that I would inform and discuss the cuts with the Union and provide the specific recommendations for the Committee’s final approval before notifying the teachers and bringing the recommendation to the Committee for a vote.”*
- How could that possibly be done in accordance with OMA before the actual meeting where they are discussed? By law, teachers being discussed need to be notified before any discussion takes place.
- This was never discussed with me. It was never communicated to me that they wanted to coordinate or be forewarned. I alerted them that the notices were sent. I cc’d NEA-SK Union President Nelson on every single letter. SC’s never did “the coordinating” in the past. They make the actual lay off decision on May 14th in an actual meeting.
- **Consultation with individual teachers**
 - I have not met with teachers displaced or recommended for lay-off. This was not the practice in the past nor was it a directive or included in any policy or contract.
- **Why were the actual teachers noticed different from April 19 to May 28?**
 - If there was a mistake on my lists then it could have been easily corrected when the NEA-SK President and I were scheduled to meet before the May 14 SC meeting.
 - Or, it could have been corrected when I was scheduled to meet with Andrew Henneous and Chair Canter on April 25.
 - Or, it could have been corrected during the SC executive session of May 14.
 - If teachers that were more senior were noticed, then the junior teacher held an additional certification in an area of need that the more senior teacher did not have.
 - As I indicated in my interview with Charles Ruggiero, in many cases, teaching positions were not being recommended for elimination in full but decreased (for example from 1.0 to .8). By state law in order to reduce a teacher’s position from 1.0 to .8 the SC would need to lay them off at 1.0 before June 1st and then reinstate them at .8 or the teacher would be legally entitled to a 1.0 position.
 - In the memo to the SC on May 28 Interim Superintendent Hicks stated that he made substantive changes to the SC budget cut list largely at the elementary level in ESL and monolingual classes. I was using the actual SC approved budget cuts to notify teachers.

- **Why involuntarily transfer?**

- I did previously meet with involuntarily transferred teachers per contract.
- This year was unusual because the PAT policy and contract abruptly changed.
- The language was problematic because it was literally cut and pasted from the NK language into the existing SK policy and several components were in conflict with current (and still existing) language. For example, SK has no recall list. SK has never required the administration to keep track of previously displaced and transferred teachers so that they can participate in the job selection process first, and there was never an obligation to provide a vacancy list as soon as the budget was passed on April 9.
- I involuntarily transferred a handful of teachers each year and as stated above I had the full support of CBA, policy and law to do so.
- Please note that I gave “good cause” reason in the involuntary transfer letter.
- In the letter, I offered each teacher a meeting by contract. No teachers replied asking for a meeting.
- There were nine teachers involuntarily transferred. Two of the nine teachers made a request to be involuntarily transferred-therefore no need to meet. NEA-SK President Nelson was cc’d on these requests. Four of the nine teacher positions were cut by the SC and I returned the teachers to their original positions or full time same position when SC reduced to part time (two were academic coaches-see the unchanged portion of PAT policy). Two of the nine teacher positions were occupying positions that more senior teachers listed above were entitled to via certification and seniority. One of the nine teacher positions was the only teacher in the district with the appropriate certification for this position created by a budget cut of the SC.

- **Why displace?**

- Teachers are displaced in lieu of layoff because they have high seniority and are no longer eligible (because of certification or section reduction or program reduction) to hold the same position they held the previous year.
- I sent eight displacement notices.
- Three teachers were not certified to teach DLI (Dual Language Immersion) in accordance with the SC directive (at program development) to increase DLI to grade four.
- One teacher was not certified to teach ESL in accordance with the RIDE corrective action plan.
- One teacher was displaced due to a budget reduction section elimination included in SC budget.
- Two teachers were displaced due to SC budget cuts (one made by the Special Educational Director and one made by the CCMS principal).
- One teacher was temporarily displaced pending referendum and would have been reinstated immediately if there was no referendum (as was done by Interim Superintendent Hicks when there was no longer the threat of referendum).
- There was no need for these teachers to receive an OMA letter to be discussed via SC meeting because of their high seniority they would not have been recommended for lay off.
- Displacements were done in past practice.

- I did not assign these teachers to positions. That would be accomplished during the job fair with the union in June.
- **Not following a School Committee directive?**
 - The report states, *“In short, credible evidence exists to conclude that Stringfellow was directed to bring back the final list of cuts/consolidations to the Committee for its final approval before notifying teachers.”*
 - I was not notified of any such School Committee directive.
 - How could this possibly occur outside of a SC meeting without noticing the teachers they would be discussed? That would have been a violation of the Open Meetings Act.
 - It is very clear in the letters to the teachers that I planned to make a recommendation to the SC on May 14 and therefore this notice was not a layoff notice but an OMA notice.
- **Noticing was improper?**
 - The report states, *“This clearly was not done. Accordingly, I find that Stringfellow’s selection process and notices were improper, as they were not in accordance with established practice or the Committee’s directive.”*
 - There was no such School Committee directive.
 - The OMA notification was done in the same manner as prior years.
 - The report states, *“This failure, in the least, amounted to negligence perhaps because she was engaged in the process of transitioning to a new job.”*
 - This is an unsubstantiated accusation of negligence.
 - Negligence is a very strong and in this case, inaccurate word that I take deep issue with. I spent an entire week (day and night) working on these lists to make sure they were accurate. No evidence to date has shown they were not accurate. It is unfair and inaccurate to compare Interim Superintendent Hicks’ list of May 28th with my list of April 19 since the Hicks’ list was compiled with the knowledge that there would be no referendum, with significant changes in the budget cuts, and with more current information on teacher retirements, resignations, and leaves of absence.
 - My contract in Norwich did not commence until July 1. I was not in the midst of transition.
- **Not in compliance with law?**
 - *“On May 3, the Committee appointed Bob Hicks as Superintendent and authorized counsel to conduct the present investigation into the personnel actions taken by Stringfellow. Following the appointment of Hicks, Canter reported that some of the personnel whom Stringfellow laid off had to be reinstated because the elimination of their position would have placed the Department out of legal compliance.”*
 - There is no evidence to support this conclusion. I did not lay off anyone. The Department was in legal compliance and would have remained in legal compliance once the layoff process was completed.
 - The report states, *“It is possible that the legal inadequacy of this notice could potentially be cured should SKSD be required to re-notice the effected teachers of a new evidentiary hearing after their filing of an appeal challenging the non-renewal decision.”*

- My OMA notice correspondence was not a vote of the SC. It was correspondence letting the teacher know the SC was discussing them in executive session. That notice is required by law.
- The report states, *“While it is alleged that some of the cuts/consolidations proposed by Stringfellow would have caused the Department to be out of compliance with its legal obligations under IDEA and FAPE, I find insufficient evidence to reach findings on these allegations.”*
- That is because the Department was always in compliance.
- **There is no evidence to substantiate these claims.**
- **Spending taxpayer money unnecessarily-**I was prevented from meeting with the parties because I was placed on leave-the end result layoff notices from the SC would have been the same.
 - I gave OMA notices and was placed on leave before I could make recommendations to SC. The notices were based entirely on the budget reduction plan voted on by the SC and inverse seniority notification.
 - All the SC needed to do was direct me to change the lists when we discussed them on May 14, but they did not do that, instead they launched an “investigation.”
 - The SC could have simply changed its mind when the lists were presented to them on May 14, which was their right.

Text messages from Stephanie Canter and Emily Cummiskey

The report indicated that Stephanie Canter communicated with me on April 19. She did not that I recall. I do have text messages from her earlier in the week:

April 15 3:57PM

Stephanie Canter (SC) Kristen Stringfellow (KS)

SC Hey Kristen, With (teacher) retiring, that should be treated as 1.0 FTE reduction in music, and there should be no other impact to music positions. Do you agree?

KS You are forgetting middle school as I indicated at the SC meeting...several SC meetings ago probably.

SC When did you find out (teacher) was retiring?

KS Hold on let me see when it was date stamped.

SC I think that the committee will ultimately vote to prevent further cuts to music personnel, and treat the retirement as an FTE reduction. So I would mentally prepare for that when you look at cuts.

KS Date stamped 4-10 so I probably saw it on 4-10 or 4-11.

KS OK but what does that mean exactly? You will be adding the positions back into the budget?

SC It would need to come from elsewhere and spread the cut impact beyond music.

KS Got it...You'll have to explain it to me later (SC liked the comment)

April 15 6:48 PM (12 minutes before the Town Council Budget Hearing)

SC We should not bring up budget specifics like that tonight though-I don't want to get pulled into the weeds. We can talk after tonight.

KS There are tons of music kids here.

SC I figured there would be.

KS But he (RM) has not even been laid off and its not really budget in as much as it is enrollment and least senior in the Personnel Assignment Process.

April 18 1:58PM

SC Do we have a policy that prevents a principal from writing a letter of recommendation for a teacher?

KS Can you be more specific?

SC If a teacher asks an administrator for a letter of recommendation, is that permitted?

KS Permitted by whom?

SC By district policy. I had a teacher tell me they were denied a letter of recommendation by a principal because of a policy we have against it.

KS Without specifics I will need to respond generally. We have had several occasions in the past where a principal or district administrator has written a letter of recommendation for someone non tenured or not performing well in some area (a specific grade level or school) and as a result in arbitration and in litigation and hearings it was used against the district. Legal has provided many trainings to us over the years.

KS If it was someone applying for an internal job (like if it was CM) and Pauline or I wrote a letter of recommendation and Pauline or I were on the committee that was seen by the teachers and parents on the interview committee as being improper and biased. So for internal applicants we explain to the interview committee that they don't need letters of recommendation. If you are willing to share the situation I may be able to be of more help.

SC Its not really my info to share. But just to clarify-is there a policy regarding teacher letters of recommendation? For external employment.

KS No SC Policy...Yes legal guidance, PD and administrative protocol and guidance. We have been continually advised against it and we do so infrequently depending on the teacher tenure status and performance of the teacher. There is also nothing stating that a supervisor is required to write one if they are not completely comfortable doing so.

SC Yikes. Considering how many teachers will not be called back this seems pretty heartless protocol.

KS This is what we were advised from legal based on the litigations that were posed against the community.

SC OK thank you!

April 22 9:07PM

SC Major issues with the way layoffs were carried out. This was disrespectful and in complete disregard of standard operating procedures, and you know it.

April 23 7:05PM

SC Texts me a picture of the social media post by Norwich indicating my appointment.

SC Well this explains a lot (sad face). Congratulations on the opportunity, Kristen. You've done brilliant things in SK.

Email exchange between NEA-SK Teachers' Union President Brian Nelson to Kristen Stringfellow on April 11, 2019 at 2:29PM

"Good afternoon Kristen,

NEA/SK leadership would like to schedule a meeting with you to discuss which positions are going to be eliminated, who is actually being laid off and who has submitted their retirement letter. I have requested that Mary Barden join us as well since she is very familiar with the new transfer process. Please let me know when you are available.”

My response at 3:22PM to Brian, Mick Lefort and Mary Ellen Murano

“Good Afternoon,

As far as I know, the only 2 teachers who have submitted their retirement letters are (redacted and redacted). Maryellen is out until Monday, if there is someone I am missing I will have her email you. If you need to know before Monday please consult Board Docs as all retirements are publicly received at a SC business meeting. Mary Ellen, please email Brian and Mick a copy of each retirement letter going forward as it is received. Before determining which positions are going to be eliminated I need principals to finalize their schedules and I need to verify elementary enrollments and determine elementary sections and that should all be finalized soon. I have some policy questions that I am running by Andrew and then I need to actually finalize the lay off list, the displacement list and the vacancy list. When it is complete, I always share with NEA-SK leadership, as you know. I agree that well before the new transfer process is even started we need to meet. I will request that Andrew also join us. I will ask Mary Ellen to set up that meeting to ensure that we are all on the same page.

Enjoy a great vacation week.”

- I was asked who was retiring-I answered.
- I was asked to set up a meeting-A meeting was set up with Mary Barden for before the recommendations for lay off meeting on May 14
- I was asked to set up a meeting before the transfer process (the job fair). That meeting would be set up between May 14 and the Job fair date in June.
- I cc'd Nelson on every single OMA Notice.
- I was not asked to meet before OMA Notices were sent.

Email from Brian Nelson (NEA-SK Teachers' Union President) to staff on April 22, 2019

“Warm Greetings,

As you may or may not know, layoff letters were received by many of our colleagues today. Because of the very difficult and uncomfortable budget discussions this year, it was not surprise that layoffs would be deep. That being said, the manner in which they were sent out was shocking, disappointing and seemingly calculated.

In the context of talking with Mick and I about working together to avoid panic, Dr. Stringfellow stated on February 27th that there is “nothing worse than a surprise.” She then went ahead and without forewarning mailed letters to almost 90 teachers today.

From day one we have stressed to Dr. Stringfellow how important morale is to our teachers and she was seemingly receptive. By denying the union any professional courtesy in this process, Dr. Stringfellow has demonstrated how she regards the teachers of this district. An administration-led conversation two months ago alluded with union leadership over this matter instead led to my being notified by a teacher new to the district that she's received her letter today. There is no excuse for this. Previously I'd only been informed that letters would be out by May 14th. There was a serious breakdown in communication and it was not accidental.

It is typically not wise to speculate in writing, but in an effort to best inform our teachers I do want to point out that the superintendent's tone has changed dramatically since her PAT process

was replaced. The new PAT process is a direct challenge to her power and authority over personnel. And based on comments she's made it appears that she is trying her best to create discomfort in an effort to blame and muddy the new policy (which is not related to layoffs) in favor of her old system of interviews. Sabotage may be too strong a word, but based on the evidence at hand, it appears has taken aim at this policy change.

69 teachers received lay off letters today. Others were notified of transfers or displacements. This is going to be a very difficult time for our teachers and we ask that you support each other as best you can. Mick and myself ask for your patience as we push back and search for answers. Again, patience is key because it's only natural that rumors will swirl and they have a tendency to be more sticky when we're most stressed. If you have any questions do not hesitate to contact Mick, myself, or your union reps. We will keep you updated and will continue to visit buildings to continue discussions around the new PAT process, layoffs, and any other issues we can provide answers for.

Please stay strong and allow time to sort this craziness out.

We cannot make any promises and no matter what, these cuts are going to be painful....but we'll do our best to get answers and to make sure the process is as fair and transparent as possible. Our goal is not to continue a cycle of antagonism but instead to address these wrongs and again invite the superintendent to cooperate in decisions that are integral to what's most important: teaching and learning.

Best, Brian and Mick"

Of note,

- Brian and Mick call these OMA notifications, layoff notices, when clearly they are not.
- Brian states that he was not notified of the letters until a teacher called him. However, Brian was actually cc'd on every letter.
- Who informed Brian and Mick that OMA letters would go out by May 14th? He did not ask me when they were going out. As the co-chair of the PAT committee Brian should know the PAT timeline which is published for all teachers. However, Brian did not attend any PAT meetings this year.
- They mention February 27 which was a facilities work session. I do not recall speaking to them at all on that day at all.
- Brian and Mick claim that my tone had changed since my PAT policy was changed. I did not write the first PAT policy. It was the SC attorney. It was not my policy. The new PAT policy was changed on April 9. I do not recall having a conversation with Brian or Mick on the topic between that night and the writing of this letter (3 days shy of April vacation).
- Any concern about the PAT policy changes would be that the most qualified teacher will not be given the position and that is clearly not good for our students.
- They state that the new PAT policy is not related to layoffs.

Letter from Chair Stephanie Canter sent to all NEA-SK Teachers on Tuesday April 22nd

"Warm Greetings,

I am writing to you all in my individual capacity and not representing the South Kingstown School Committee (which I currently Chair). I am truly saddened and dismayed at the manner in which our valuable, hardworking teachers were recently informed of personnel changes: either a layoff, a transfer, or a displacement.

People are understandably nervous because there will not be as many positions available for those who are laid off to return to in the upcoming year due to budgetary cuts stemming from enrollment, demographics and logistics. While in previous years we had opportunity for just about every teacher who was laid off to return, this upcoming year will not be the same. This is a stark reality of the final funded Town Council budget.

But in no case should a stark reality (or perceived crunched time frame) be an excuse for a lack of emotional intelligence and genuine respect for others. The actions to stoically inform teachers (without advanced review of our legal counsel, your union leadership, or other committee members) taken over a holiday weekend prior to a planned work absence of our most senior administrator is unacceptable professional practice and likely caused much distress, chaos, and anxiety needlessly.

Again, there is never an acceptable excuse to check professional courtesy at the door.

Please know that this is of great concern to me and it is being discussed along appropriate venues on your behalf. Thanks for all you do, please accept my regrets and reach out anytime.

Sincerely, Stephanie Canter”

Of note,

- If Ms. Canter is not writing as SC chair, how did she gain access to the official SK teacher list serve? That is unusual.
- Teachers were informed by letter. They have been informed by letter for 10 years. Per the PAT Committee (equal membership of teachers and administrators), principals do not hand teachers OMA letters from the Superintendent or layoff letters from the SC. Teachers are notified by mail. I presume that is how Interim Superintendent Hicks notified them as well.
- The findings of Ms. Canter on April 23rd (well before I was placed on leave and months before I was asked about the notices by Mr. Ruggiero) were exactly the findings of Mr. Ruggiero’s final report.” *without advanced review of our legal counsel, your union leadership, or other committee members.”*

As you can see, I operated lawfully and in full compliance with the law, the CBA and SK policy. This “investigation” was undertaken in retaliation for me moving to my new assignment in Norwich. I trust that this response has now set the record straight.

I wish the students, families, teachers and administrators the very best as they transition into the future.

Sincerely,

Kristen Stringfellow, Ed. D.